

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Jesus – willing and able

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

One of the sadder things about modern life, especially in our cities, is our unwillingness to get involved. Perhaps we have an elderly neighbour we haven't seen for some time, but in the busyness of life we keep putting off knocking on their door to see if they're OK. We see some poor person in trouble of one kind or another, but we're more likely to keep walking or driving than turn aside to see if they need help. Perhaps we've heard stories about people who by stopping to help have endangered themselves - and that's a risk we'd rather not take. So through fear, or busyness with our own concerns, or the sheer pace of modern life, any stirrings of compassion we might feel are easily silenced. We put aside that willingness to help meet someone's need, which surely we're meant to have as part of being human.

One of the beautiful things about Jesus was his readiness to be involved - and to give himself to meeting people's needs. He engaged with people, whoever they were, whatever their backgrounds, however criticized he was for crossing boundaries.

I

The Roman military officer who came to Jesus one day in the lakeside town of Capernaum had been stationed in Jewish territory, but would certainly not have been Jewish. We know from the accounts we have of Jesus that he saw his role in his earthly life as getting his own people to know who he was, and believe in him. But that didn't stop him engaging with anyone who came to him, wherever they came from. This particular officer was a centurion, in charge of a cohort, but he was powerless to deal with the suffering of one of his servants, who was dying. He did know about Jesus, and in desperation he sought his help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home, paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus responded, "I will go and heal him."

It's no surprise that Jesus was ready to go. His willingness on that occasion fits the pattern of his life, as the one who laid claim, by word and deed, to be the Messiah - the Saviour-King God had promised to send centuries before. He said again and again, he was the Son sent by the Father. That meant he'd come from the glory and harmony of the Godhead to heal a broken world. Jesus' willingness to respond to the call to the centurion's house merely mirrored what he'd already done, which was expressed this way in a very early poem about him:

Being in very nature God,
He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself,
and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!

Jesus did what to our limited minds is unthinkable. And yet it fits the picture of God as he'd always revealed himself. He'd seen his good creation turn horribly bad, as humankind chose to ignore him, and do what seemed right in their own eyes. The concern for each other's welfare we're meant to feel withered into

self-interest. 'Self first' prompted a competitive spirit that opened the door to contempt, envy and jealousy. That led in turn to bitterness and murderous hatred.

If we ourselves can be appalled by the depths to which humans can sink, how must God feel? Surely, as the Source of pure, self-giving love, he's immeasurably more repulsed, as he sees what humans are capable of. The first book in the Bible records that God 'was grieved that he had made humankind on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.'

But because God *is* Love, and sees what we can be, he didn't give up. He worked through people who *did* admit their dependence on him - and were prepared to swim against the tide. Like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David - all of them fallible human beings. But they were open to following the promptings, which they recognized as coming from God - the God who meets the depths of our need with even greater depths of compassion.

II

In the centuries before Jesus appeared, there were plenty of indications given as to what God is like. He revealed himself to the descendants of Abraham. He miraculously delivered them from the oppression they lived under in Egypt, and kept them alive in the desert. He gave them a space where they could be free of the cruel and vile practices, followed by those who worshipped other gods. But time and again, their response to his kindness was to turn to those same gods. For centuries he patiently sent messengers to call them back to ways that reflected his love, but to no avail. So he removed them from the land for the best part of a century. Then, faithful to the covenant he'd made with them, he brought them back for a fresh start. At that point they did give up worshipping idols, and edged towards doing what God had wanted them to do all along - reflect his character in a way that would draw the whole world to himself. The Roman soldier who came to Jesus to ask for help for his dying servant was one of those attracted to the God who'd made himself known through Israel. Luke records that he loved the Jewish nation, and had even helped build a synagogue.

But on the whole, foolish human pride remained in the way of Israel relating to God and reflecting his love. It wasn't until Jesus appeared that God's character was truly seen. Jesus' close associate John wrote this:

We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God, but the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

The theologian Don Carson expressed it this way in one of his poems:

*In timeless reaches of eternity
The Triune God decided that the Word,
The self-expression of the Deity,
Would put on flesh and blood - and thus be heard.*

The centurion came to Jesus to get help for his very sick servant. Jesus said he'd come and heal him, and at that point the centurion said he needn't come.

The centurion gave two reasons. Firstly, he said to Jesus, "Lord, I don't deserve to have you come under my roof." He was, after all, an officer in the army whose forces were occupying Jesus' homeland. He may have been thinking how he himself would feel if *he* were asked a favour by someone occupying *his* homeland. Perhaps he was thinking of the Jewish law that declared Jews entering Gentile houses to be unclean - although he'd probably heard that Jesus wasn't inclined to be bound by the letter of the law. Or perhaps there was something else about Jesus - something that spoke of another world, uncorrupted by all that spoils this world's peace - a world where love reigns supreme, and where the authority of the Creator of all that is, is unquestioned. The same kind of thing Jesus' friend Peter had seen, when he fell at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!"

III

Besides the purity of God which Jesus reflected, there was something else about him - another reason why the centurion saw no need for Jesus to come to his house. And that was the natural authority Jesus exuded - which had already amazed the crowds who followed him. What the centurion said next astonished *Jesus*, to the point where he said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I've not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." What did the centurion say? He said, "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed."

He went on to say that he himself was a man under authority, with soldiers under him. He could tell this one, "Go," and he'd go; and that one, "Come," and he'd come. He could say to his servant, "Do this," and he'd do it. In saying he himself was a man under authority, was he recognizing that the authority he believed Jesus had was, in fact, the authority of God himself? Surely the Creator-God is the only One able, not just to heal a paralyzed man on his deathbed, but to do that with a word.

Jesus knew only too well that a great many of his fellow-Israelites were refusing to believe the authority he clearly had was God's. Some even attributed it to Satan. His own disciples were confused. They had no idea what he was talking about when he said he'd rise from the dead - which would surely be the greatest possible vindication of any claim to authority. They stuck with what they knew, which was that dead men don't rise.

The third day after his death, his empty tomb convinced a few he was alive - together with the way the cloths that had been wrapped round his body were empty, but still folded. Some saw him with their own eyes, and were beside themselves with joy. But one of them, Thomas, wasn't with them at the time, and he said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later, Jesus stood before him, and invited him to look at his hands and put his hand into Jesus' side. "Stop doubting," said Jesus, "and believe!" And Thomas said, "My Lord and my - God!"

Some weeks later, when Jesus farewelled his followers, Thomas was there to hear Jesus say:

All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' resurrection vindicated his claim to have God's authority, but well before that happened, the centurion was granted evidence of the authority Jesus had. When he returned to his house, he found his servant had been healed - at the very moment when Jesus had said, "Go! It will be done, just as you believed it would."

Conclusion

There's something else we learn about Jesus from his encounter with the Roman centurion - and that's his power to bring together people of every nation. After commending the centurion for his great faith, Jesus said,

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and take their places at the feast, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

That's been happening now for twenty centuries. People of every conceivable kind have been brought together by their faith in Jesus the Christ. Because he *is* love, he doesn't use force. People are free to respond or not, and different responses may divide. But still Jesus has the power to break down the barriers humans put up, and unite people of very different backgrounds under his peaceful and loving rule.

Gracious God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for making yourself known through him. Help us to love as he loved, and be moved by his compassion to reach out to anyone and everyone in need. Amen.